



Quote of the Week

Since the Lisbon growth targets were set almost four years ago the growth gap between Europe and the US has widened; not because the US is smarter intellectually but because they're better at getting things done (...) 'We need fewer, not more, prescriptive proposals from Europe.

Mary Harney, Irish Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment

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HEADLINES

EU / Irish presidency: Ireland will focus on growth and competitiveness

"Working Together for Growth": This promising slogan will drive Ireland's EU Presidency, in the path of the Lisbon Agenda. Ireland, who took up the EU Presidency on 1st January 2004, will focus on Growth and Investment, Competitiveness, Employment & Social Inclusion, and Sustainable development.

On the first chapter, Ireland will mainly focus on the implementation of the European Action for Growth, as adopted by the Council of 12th December, and investment in human capital and R&D. This includes investments in air and land transport, energy, and telecommunication, as well as initiatives to boost the creation of an ERA (European Research Area). Regarding Human Capital, Ireland will focus on the Europass Initiative for the transparency of qualifications and competencies.

Concerning competitiveness, The Irish Presidency aims at stimulating entrepreneurship, economic activity and business development. This will include being pro-active on the issues of chemicals and boosting measure to complete the Internal Market. In this chapter, issues of relevance for SMEs will include REACH, the Proposals on Unfair Commercial practices, the Framework Directive on services,

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finalising the Community patent, amending the Community Customs code and Taxation (Taxation of Saving's Directive; expected proposal on VAT regarding the place of supply of services).

On the social affairs side, the Irish Presidency aims at promoting closer cooperation with Social Partners, finalising the coordination of national security systems, and making progress on the proposal for a directive on equal treatment between men and women.

Other priorities relate to the transatlantic relationships, where the Irish Presidency will seek strengthening the ties with the US; improving cross border police cooperation, and boosting asylum and immigration coordination.

ESBA welcomes the Irish Presidency's priorities, particularly on the competitiveness and R&D ambitions. ESBA hopes that the Irish Presidency will pay these objectives the same attention it will give to the overarching goals of completing the constitution and enlargement. ESBA urges the Irish Presidency to support the preparation of the future action plan for entrepreneurship in a way that will focus on core issues, which are improving the availability of finance for entrepreneurs, reducing the fiscal and administrative burden, and promoting an entrepreneurial Europe (cf the results of the Green Paper consultation), letting aside small support measures with reduced or no impact.

[More info](#)

EU / Social Affairs : Consultation launched on Working Time

The European Commission has launched on 5th January a Consultation on working time, with a view of reviewing the EU Working Directive 93/104/EC. This decision follows the publication by the European Commission of a report that mainly focuses on the implementation of the so-called "opt-out", which allows individuals to work more than 48 hours a week, and the definition of the "period of reference". It also analyses the impact of a recent case law on the definition of working time and the qualification of time spent "on-call" (working time or rest period).

The deadline for the Consultation is 31st March. From this date, the Commission will be expected to take a decision on how to ensure that the directive is respected in all EU Member States.

ESBA welcomes this consultation initiative but fears that the rationales behind this consultation are one-sided, i.e. only looking at the protection of health and safety of workers against extended working hours and ignoring that a worker can be in a situation where it is his/her interest to work more than 48 hours a week. In other words, the idea seems to focus disproportionately on the eventual impact of extended working hours on individuals' health, whereas the benefits of the opting out provision are overshadowed: For many SMEs, especially in the UK, adapting workforce to workload has been beneficial in many respects such as business survival, business development, maintenance of thousand of jobs, etc... Thousands of small businesses would not be able to survive without the opt-out.

ESBA therefore asks for a sound impact assessment to complement the consultation before any further step is taken regarding the revision of this directive. Also, ESBA wonders whether any survey on the impact of unemployment on individuals' health, safety and stress has already been organised by DG Employment, and whether such data would be comparable to a study on impact on individuals' health of extended working hours.

[More info](#)

IN BRIEF

EU / Internal Market : “Europass”, for more mobility of skills and qualifications

The European Commission has launched a new initiative to improve the recognition of qualification and skills in the enlarged Europe. The proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a single framework for the transparency of qualifications and competencies includes various transparency-promoting instruments into a coherent framework, identified by the single label "Europass".

[More info](#)

EU/ Internal Market: New measures to assist SMEs

The European Commission has decided to add 28 new Euro Info Centres to its network. This should help more (SMEs) gain access to information and advice on the internal market and other relevant EU policies. Whereas Turkey will have almost a third new EIC, the other new EICs will be spread among 13 other Member States, candidate and acceding countries. The EIC network now consists of 321 offices in 42 countries.

[More info](#)

EU / Education: Europe behind US in top universities

According to a recent study published by the University, Europe has only 31 universities in the top 100. The UK only has universities in the top 20 (Cambridge 5th, Oxford 9th, Imperial College London 17th). The rest of the top 20 is American with the exception of Tokyo University in Japan. In Europe, other countries present in the top 100 are Switzerland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Denmark, Italy, Finland, Austria and Belgium .

[More info](#)

EU / R&D: European Business Summit on 11-12 March 2004

The European Business Summit will take place in Brussels on 11-12 March 2004. EBS is a joint organisation of DG Research, UNICE, and the FEB (Federation of Enterprises in Belgium). It will act as dialogue platform with European policy-makers to make a first assessment of the Sixth Framework Programme (FP6) as well as make suggestions for the next Framework Programme. Each of the FP6 thematic priorities will be tackled during the two days, plus how SMEs can benefit from the FP6, IPR, etc.

[More info](#)

EU/ Taxation & Customs: New proposal against tax fraud

The European Commission has proposed a Regulation to strengthen cooperation between Member States' tax authorities in the field of excise duties on alcohol, tobacco and energy products, in order to improve the functioning of the Internal Market, facilitate collection of taxes by Member States, ensure equal treatment of traders and combat fraud.

[More info](#)

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EU / Internal Market: Implementing measures for directive on market abuse

Three implementing measures related to the Directive on insider dealing and market manipulation (market abuse - 2003/6/EC) have been adopted by the European Commission on January 7th. These implementing measures include for example detailed criteria for determining what constitutes inside information, which non exhaustive factors have to be examined when assessing possible market manipulation as well as provisions on how and when issuers must disclose inside information.

[More info](#)